

An Uncomfortable Family Reunion

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Summary: When young Kindred Ariana arrives in Dijon, France, the last thing she expects to find is her estranged adopted sister, Clairesse. When the initial shock wears away she discovers they have more in common than she ever realised. Warning: contains abuse

1. An Unexpected Surprise

On most nights, the Jardin botanique de l'Arquebuse was quiet and tranquil, almost devoid of life. Though popular during the day, it was generally deserted at night save for the occasional young couple, hoping to find a place of romance where they were undisturbed.

Not this night, however. Instead it was full of the noise of excitable Kindred, engaging in insignificant small talk. The Prince had chosen the place to host Court for the night and he sat, practically drowning in regalia, in a small gazebo overlooking the still waters of the lake. All around there were beautiful gowns and finely-tailored suits of every colour and style. The neonates gabbled excitedly amongst themselves and the Elders stood off to the side, cold and aloof as they surveyed the surrounds.

It was amongst this overwhelming pandemonium that a young Daeva found herself experiencing the pomp and glamour of a European Court for the first time. Reaching into her pocket, she felt for the small envelope there and sighed with relief that she had not lost it.

"_I don't remember things being this complicated when I went to Court in Adelaide for the first time,"_ she thought anxiously to herself. Granted, that Court had been much smaller and it wasn't really functioning properly at the time, but even when she was warned that the Court of Dijon was very different, nothing could have prepared her for the reality.

She was broken out of her confused reverie by the realisation that a young gentleman had addressed her and she began to panic even more. _"What on Earth did he just say? I have no idea what he said but

judging by the look on his face it was important! Oh crap!"_

"Erm, sorry, I er don't speak French," she stammered. Whether or not he understood her she couldn't really tell, but he looked angry and suddenly she wondered if she'd already blown it. Her eyes widened and she froze as he let out a furious stream of words she did not understand.

"Mademoiselle Trentworth?" A voice called from afar. A voice the young Kindred had not heard for several years and it was with both relief and apprehension that she turned to the one who had interrupted them.

Clairesse had changed so much that for a few seconds Ariana didn't recognise her. She couldn't help but stare as the other woman conversed in hurried French with the gentleman. Eventually he left them alone and Claïresse took Ariana's arm, leading her a bit away from the crowd.

Ariana was so surprised that she forgot to mention that her Title had changed since they'd last met. She'd heard rumours of Claïresse skipping the country but everyone had assumed she'd gone to Paris, after all her boasting about how much better Parisian unlife was. Why was she here?

"Maybe she was too much of a coward to face Paris after her little stunt with the Invictus,"_ she thought sourly. But again, her thoughts were interrupted.

"Mademoiselle Trentworth, what brings you here? You could not have chosen a worse night to arrive," Claïresse muttered anxiously.

"Funny, I don't remember her accent being that thick,"_ Ariana thought to herself, biting her lip as she tried to think of a response. "Why? What's so bad about tonight?" she asked curiously, a question she regretted almost instantly as Claïresse's face darkened.

"Oh boy. She's still got that temper. Shit!"_ but contrary to Ariana's assumption, when Claïresse opened her mouth to respond there was not a trace of anger in her voice.

"Mademoiselle, there is talk of an execution tonight. For breaching the Second Tradition. An act mirroring the circumstances of your Embrace, remember? If the Prince finds out you're here... he's very angry and there's no telling what he might do."

"It's Madame, actually," Ariana blurted out. "And if you must know I'm here because I... needed to get away." She took a step back just in case the other woman Frenzied, but to her surprise Claïresse looked sympathetic.

"Oui, I think I understand," Claïresse murmured. "When is your Appointment?" she asked.

Ariana pulled the envelope out of her pocket. "Um, midnight I think?"

Claïresse glanced at her watch. "SacrÃ©! Not much time! Wait here

Madame; I will be right back."

And so Ariana was left on her own again. Alone to muse silently and to wonder. True, she hadn't known Clairesse very well but the difference was still a surprise. Everything about her appearance seemed to have changed, from the style of gown she wore, to her jewellery, to the way she styled her hair. In fact, if Ariana hadn't heard her voice she would have assumed it was some random stranger.

"I don't remember her ever having her hair down like that. It was always in that fancy 'do. And since when does Clairesse wear plain white cotton? What happened to her fancy ballgowns?"_ she wondered to herself as said woman returned.

"Almost time ma cherie. You must follow my lead if want to live through the night." Clairesse said and again Ariana was confused. It all sounded so mysterious. "I'll need to know your full Title if this is to work," the older Kindred told her as they walked, leaving Ariana even more confused.

"Um, Madame Ariana Trentworth ye Penthrieve, Advocate," she recites breathlessly. "What is going..."

But she was unable to finish as the pair of them reached the gazebo and were greeted by a tall man in black. Ariana shrank back shyly as Clairesse fired off something in rapid French and the man stood aside, gesturing for them to pass.

"You're lucky the Prince speaks English. Follow my lead and you'll be fine," she whispered quickly as they climbed the steps and Ariana found herself face to face with the Prince of Dijon.

Clairesse immediately sank into a graceful curtsy, gently yanking Ariana down with her. "Your Excellency, I hope you will permit me to present my sibling minor, Madame Ariana Trentworth ye Penthrieve, Advocate, as my personal guest."

Ariana had to bite her tongue from crying out in shock. Clairesse had openly denounced her membership of House Penthrieve years before and though Ariana had been taken in as a Ward of Clairesse's Sire, strictly speaking they were not siblings. And why was Clairesse speaking in the manner of the Invictus when she was long since removed from the covenant? But she remembered the instruction to follow Clairesse's lead, and so instead of voicing her protestations she bowed her head.

The rest of the night was a blur. Clairesse never let the young woman out of her sight and there were a few moments, when Ariana's mind was free from other thoughts, when she vaguely wondered if this was how Clairesse's childe had felt when she'd returned oh so briefly to Adelaide. They met and greeted and mingled until Ariana was exhausted just from trying to remember everyone's names. Finally at about 3am Clairesse excused them and led Ariana back to her Haven.

Ariana waited until they were completely alone with no chance of being overheard before she let loose with the questions. "What happened back there? I'm so confused! I thought..."

Clairesse smiled weakly as she interrupted. "You thought I would

abandon you to the dogs? The Court thinks you belong to a powerful and respectable lineage. Would you prefer I told them your Sire was Bloodhunted for his blatant disregard of the Traditions?" she responded calmly.

"Well, why wouldn't you?" Ariana demanded hotly. "You're the one who called that Bloodhunt! "Your "First Bloodhunt" is something to be proud of, isn't it? Ten years ago you were too good for that 'powerful and respectable lineage', but now it's nice and convenient, isn't it? Family isn't some toy you can pick up and play with when you feel like and then abandon when you don't want it any more!"

Clairesse looked taken aback. "Madame, you have no idea what I suffered at the hands of the Patriarch of that House. You think the decision to cover for you was one I made out of convenience? Why would it be convenient too remind myself of that? I did not leave House Penthrieve out of being 'too good' for it. I left because I saw my dear Sire for the first time without my sight being clouded by his conditioning, and I had no desire to continue to be a pawn in his game. As for the Bloodhunt, I did not want to call it but I had little choice if I wanted the Court to survive."

Ariana looked like she was about to argue, but Claioresse raised a hand. "Madame, I never wanted to call that Bloodhunt and I am truly sorry that your Sire fell victim to it," she said firmly. "I do not expect you to forgive me but surely by now you have seen enough of Court politics to realise I had very few options."

The younger of the two pursed her lips and sat down and for a minute or two the silence between them was uncomfortably palpable. Finally Ariana opened her mouth to speak.

"You could at least have let me talk to him first," she muttered, to which Claioresse chuckled darkly.

"That is a matter you would need to take up with his Grace. Unless I'm mistaken it was he who landed the killing blow? You would remember I was not actually present at the scene when it occurred," she responded.

"No, but..." Ariana began, only to be interrupted again.

"I have said I am sorry. Would you have me pay you a boon for his life? I rather recall you as one who might find such a thing insulting. What's done is done and I cannot change the past, however much I would like to."

"What a curious thing to say," Ariana thought to herself. Claioresse has always seemed so sure of herself that Ariana never thought it possible for her to have any regrets. Could that have been a mask? There had been a shadow pass over Claioresse face as she spoke of wishing she could change the past. She looked to the dress Claioresse was wearing; so much simpler and less extravagant than anything she'd ever worn in Adelaide. Had this been a gradual or sudden change, and what had caused it to come about? She was broken out of her reverie by Claioresse's tired voice.

"The sun will be up soon. You should get some rest. There's an extra room down the hall a bit."

The older woman left the room, and Ariana was sure she caught a pained expression on her face. But then she was left alone again with her thoughts, and her utter confusion over the unexpected turn of events.

2. Where Am I?

Ariana awoke the following evening to the constant clickety drone of a sewing machine in the next room. At first she didn't recognise her surroundings and for a moment she panicked, but then the events of the previous night came back to her and she let out a sigh of relief.

As she rose and stretched, the young Kindred glanced around her. She'd been so tired that morning that she hadn't really paid much attention to anything. With curiosity getting the better of her, she wandered around the room, drinking in everything she saw.

She had expected extravagance and beauty everywhere, but the room was surprisingly bare. A small, non-descript desk sat in the corner with a handful of papers on it and imposing mahogany bookshelves lined one wall covered with old, dusty volumes, with a simplistic single bed against the opposite wall. A clock above the doorway told her it was just shy of five o'clock.

"Wow, the sun must set really early here," she thought to herself. She groaned as the familiar demands of the Beast began. She needed to feed, but she had no idea where or how she could feed here.

She was so lost in her own thoughts that she hadn't noticed the background noise of the sewing machine had stopped, nor the slender young woman standing in the doorway.

Clairesse seemed a little alarmed. Maybe Ariana's hunger was too obvious? She cleared her throat nervously, avoiding the older Kindred's gaze.

"Nice place you've got here," she muttered, gesturing through the room. But Claissesse only raised an eyebrow in response and this served to make Ariana even more anxious. "I guess I should get going. Um, thanks for letting me crash here I guess?"

To which Claissesse chuckled. "Ma cherie, you are not going anywhere. Sit," she commanded.

Much to Ariana's surprise, she felt compelled to obey, her eyes widening as she sat on the edge of the bed. _"What the fuck?"_ she thought wildly as Claissesse strode into the room, arms crossed over her chest.

"Give me the letter," she demanded, holding out her hand. Again, Ariana found she could not refuse and she reached into her pocket, removed the envelope and passed it over.

Claissesse looked on the verge of Frenzy as she examined the seal on the back. "I knew it. I fucking knew it!" she raged, tossing it aside. A stream of angry French fell from the impassioned woman's lips and for a moment Ariana remembered why she had once been scared

of her. It was almost ten minutes before Clairesse showed any sign of calming down and she leaned up against the bookshelf, closing her eyes.

Finally Ariana was brave enough to break the uneasy silence. "Is something wrong?" she asked timidly, shrinking back a bit as Clairesse opened her eyes and gave her a look.

"Everything is wrong Madame. Why did he send you here?" she demanded. Ariana was taken aback.

"Nobody sent me Mademoiselle. I..." she began, but again Clairesse interrupted.

"You think me a fool, that I do not recognise my own Sire's seal?" she shouted, causing Ariana to jump. "Well? Why have you come here?"

"For your information he didn't write that letter. I borrowed his seal. I... I ran away." Ariana's voice went from defensive to timid as she confessed to leaving of her own accord. "I didn't know you were here, okay? Everyone thought you would have gone back to Paris! No one's heard a peep out of you since you left and you were always going on about how marvelous the Parisian Court was! I thought I would be safe here!" she then shouted herself.

Clairesse looked shocked at first. Her eyes widened as Ariana continued her rant and then she took several deep breaths. "Forgive me. I... it would not be the first time he'd sent someone to track me down. I could not think of any other plausible reason for you to be here when you don't even speak the language."

She sat at the desk with a sigh, burying her face in her hands. "You were the smart one ma chérie. You did not wait for him to have the means to dispose of you."

Ariana blinked a few times, not quite understanding what the other woman meant. "When you say 'dispose of'..." she began.

"...I mean exactly that. I held Praxis, a fact of which he claimed to be proud but when my rulings were no longer convenient to him he forced me to step down and leave the country. I returned, and he quickly found a reason to have me removed from the Invictus. I tried to see my childe's rights upheld, and he rewarded me with Banishment in spite of my Recognition by the city. I brought my childe with me, and he responded by sending someone to have me killed," Clairesse explained, her voice cracking.

The pair sat in uncomfortably tense silence for several minutes. Ariana drank in Clairesse's words, allowing the full gravity of them to sink in. Finally, when she spoke, it was so soft that a feather falling might have drowned it out.

"I'm sorry. His Grace is a complete arsehole," she said.

3. Settling In

You took my heart
>Deceived me right from the start
You showed me dreams

>I wished they'd turd into real
You broke the promise and made me realise

>It was all just a lie
_- Angels, Within Temptation

The following week was perhaps one of the quietest Ariana had experienced for a long time. Clairesse refused to go out except to feed, and once to attend a meeting during which she insisted that Ariana did not leave the Haven, but she refused to say what the meeting was about or entertain the notion of the younger Kindred accompanying her.

It took her all of two nights to read every single book in the place, and by the third night, Ariana was bored. She crept into Clairesse's room, hoping the older woman would at least talk to her, but Clairesse's eyes stayed focussed on the sewing machine in front of her and the long length of fabric that she was pushing through it.

Eventually Ariana sighed. "Well, if you're not going to talk to me, at least let me help or something. I'm dying here," she grumbled, at which point Clairesse, finally, looked up.

"I have work to do, Madame. If you want something to do, the Gran Ballo is next week and all the Court is invited. Go find yourself something to wear. Unless of course, you prefer to be the embarrassment of the family," she replied tartly before bending her head over her work again.

Ariana pursed her lips. "I couldn't care less about being an embarrassment. I've been treated like one my entire Requiem," she said snappishly.

Again, Clairesse paused and looked up. She sighed. "Sorry," she muttered. "I try not to remember my unlife in Adelaide. When I look back on it, I find myself wishing I had refused the Embrace," she added sadly.

This took Ariana by surprise. "But it always seemed so easy for you. You seemed to really enjoy Court. You had the Elders eating out of your hand. And you were Prince. How many neonates can honestly say that?"

"The Elders ate out of my hand because it was convenient to them and it enabled them to use me in ways I did not understand," Clairesse snapped angrily, causing the younger woman to shrink back a bit. "You think it was easy, being the childe of that, that, salaud? Why do you think, as time went on, I spent less and less time at the Daeva Haven? Why do you think, when I briefly returned, I would not go near the place?"

Ariana blinked a few times, the confusion starting to show in her expression. "But I thought..."

Clairesse laughed. "You thought I was just causing friction for the sake of it?" she asked.

"Well, yes."

With a sigh, Clairesse got to her feet. "Tell me, how would you react if you were forced to give up everything you've worked for and leave

everything you've come to know and care about behind, only to learn that everything you knew and cared about was a lie?" she asked pointedly.

Ariana raised an eyebrow in confusion. "I guess I'd be peeved?" she replied uncertainly.

Clairesse smiled darkly before turning away and closing her eyes.

Clairesse frowned as she glanced through the thick curtains, recognising the car that had just pulled up in the street. Benoit's familiar silhouette walked up the path and knocked on the door.

Francis was curious. Of course he was, but Claioresse ushered him into another room and signalled for him to stay in there, before going to the front door and opening it.

"Benoit! I was not expecting guests this evening!" she exclaimed in tones as polite as she was able. She saw the figure now climbing out of the car and her eyes widened. Why was her Sire visiting her, unannounced, on a night she had requested to be left alone?

But she had no time to voice such questions as he pushed past her into the living room and turned to her, arms crossed against his chest and cold eyes narrowed into a frown. It was with great difficulty that she fought the urge to protest against his intrusion on her night.

"Your Grace," she murmured, bowing her head in respectful greeting. "To what do I owe this unexpected surprise?"

Cold silence radiated from the man as he stared at her. Being the child of the Duke of Adelaide had its advantages. This was one of the clear disadvantages. Anyone else disturbing her without an appointment would be tossed out, followed by sharp insults from her furious tongue. But even as Prince, she was powerless to invoke such a reprimand against her own Sire. Though it was her right, and his obligation technically to obey, she knew all too well that the punishment he would mete out to her behind closed doors was not worth the saving of her pride.

"I have some news that concerns you, Prince," he finally said quietly.

Always he addressed her simply as Prince. Not even Prince Marguerite, or Your Excellency. Just Prince. And again, Claioresse had to remind herself to hold her tongue and refrain from reprimanding him just as she would reprimand anyone else. Finally she opened her mouth to respond. "Oh? And what news is this, that is so urgent?" she asked.

"Funny," Claioresse said as she broke out of her reverie. "Because that's exactly how I felt within a month of resigning Praxis and arriving in Paris."

End
file.